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ABSTRACT

In an effort to respond to Vermont teachers' and tutors' need for learning disabilities instruction, the Stern Center for Language and Learning developed a model program to teach adults with learning disabilities. The program included 12 hours of instruction presented over Vermont interactive television to over 100 adult basic education (ABE) tutors throughout the state. Two adult students with learning disabilities were enrolled in remediation programs at the Stern Center at the same time so that their instruction could be demonstrated on videotape during the course. Follow-up visits were made to each of the 17 ABE sites in the state upon course completion to maximize opportunities for generalization of information presented. The course was designed to introduce tutors to the definition of learning disabilities and to the concept of a language learning continuum. It focused on how to identify and instruct those who presented specific problems with basic reading and spelling, decoding and encoding of the written word. Because adults with learning disabilities have good intelligence and poor visual memory, teaching strategies had to capitalize upon their good thinking rather than rote memorization. The course emphasized synthetic phonics instruction that was highly structured, sequenced, and rule based. Teaching techniques for developing a sight vocabulary to supplement synthetic phonics learning were also shared. (YLB)

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TEACHING ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

A Model Training Program for ABE Tutors

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TEACHING ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A Model Training Program For ABE Tutors

Dr. Blanche Podhajski

When the U.S. Department of Education reported in September, 1993, that 90 million Americans lack sufficient literacy skills, the spotlight focused on the importance of teaching adults how to read and write. Adult Basic Education is filled with individuals motivated to become literate. Many of these people may have learning disabilities. However, rarely are ABE tutors provided with training in how to identify and instruct students who display this handicap.

Incidence figures of learning disabilities indicate that approximately 10%-15% of the general public have learning disabilities. Given that ABE programs are populated by individuals already known to be poor readers, the percentage has been estimated as much higher, perhaps more likely approximating 30% or even 50% (Kidder, 1988).

The learning needs presented by adults with learning disabilities are complex. However, it is often these most challenging learners who present themselves to well-intentioned tutors for whom we have provided little training in clinically proven, effective teaching strategies. A study of adult literacy services in Minnesota found that 63% of all teachers and tutors identified as their top priority a need for learning disability services in improving their teaching skills (Gilligan, 1990).

In an effort to respond to this need in Vermont, where ABE teachers also identified learning disabilities instruction as a priority, the Stern Center for Language and Learning developed a model program to teach adults with learning disabilities. The program included 12 hours of instruction presented over Vermont interactive television to over 100 ABE tutors throughout the state. Two adult students with learning disabilities were enrolled in remediation programs at the Stern Center at the same time so that their instruction could be demonstrated on videotape during the course. Followup visits were made to each of the 17 ABE sites in the state upon course completion to maximize opportunities for generalization of information presented. This course was also videotaped for national distribution.

COURSE FOCUS:

"Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities" was designed to introduce tutors to the definition of learning disabilities and to the concept of a language learning continuum. Because it would not be possible to teach tutors how to identify and teach adults with all kinds of academic problems, this course focused upon how to identify and instruct those who presented specific problems with basic reading and spelling, decoding and encoding of the written word. Future programs will address reading comprehension and written language.

Before tutors in adult literacy programs can effectively instruct adults with learning disabilities, they must know how to distinguish these individuals from adults who present with other kinds of learning problems. There are numerous formal definitions of learning disabilities from Public Law 94-142, The National Joint Commission for Learning Disabilities and the Rehabilitation Services Administration. Informally, it is important for those who work with adults to understand that people with learning disabilities are individuals who do not easily acquire basic academic skills despite average or above average intelligence, intact vision and hearing, adequate opportunities to learn and no significant emotional disorders.

An easy way to keep in mind the definition of learning disabilities is by looking at three essential criteria for identification: *exclusion, discrepancy* and *information processing differences of neurological origin.*

By *EXCLUSION* we mean that it is important to understand who people with learning disabilities are NOT. Learning disabilities are not primarily the result of mental retardation, sensory impairments such as visual or hearing problems, physical handicaps, emotional disturbance or lack of opportunity to learn.

DISCREPANCY means that there is a difference between the person's good intelligence and the level at which they read, spell or do math. The magnitude of the discrepancy may vary and may depend on whether or not the person has had any effective instruction. Many adults with learning disabilities have participated in special education programs at school. However, many have become frustrated because the teaching methods presented to them were not appropriate for their particular learning style. Some adults relate stories of decreased self-esteem, of being socially promoted because of the teacher pleasing behaviors they developed, or of cheating their way through school.

INFORMATION PROCESSING DIFFERENCES OF NEUROLOGICAL ORIGIN refers to the biological basis for learning disabilities. Research has shown that very early during fetal life there are changes in the neural organization of the brains of individuals with learning disabilities which make it harder for them to process or make sense out of information heard or seen. The work of Dr. Albert Galaburda and his colleagues at Harvard has supplied evidence that people with learning disabilities or dyslexia experience failure in school not because they are unmotivated, lazy or dumb but because of genuine neurological differences (Galaburda, 1985).

THE LANGUAGE CONTINUUM

Language is a skill that separates humans from other mammals. It is helpful to think of language skills along a dynamic continuum of lifelong learning (See Figure 1).

All of us are constantly working to increase our listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. For adults with learning disabilities, these skills have not developed to a level appropriate for their intelligence. We must always look at where along the language continuum they have broken down and what we can do to address their unique learning needs.

Because this course focused upon decoding and encoding (reading and spelling) specific strategies for the identification of deficits in these areas were described. There are numerous formal test measures available for this purpose, such as the Wide Range Achievement Test - Revised, the Woodcock Johnson Psychoeducational Battery Tests of Achievement - Revised and the Diagnostic Spelling Potential Test. There are also some good informal measures, such as the Gallistel Ellis, a criterion referenced measure which is useful in assessing an adult's knowledge about words he knows how to read and spell.

Regardless of whether one uses formal or informal assessment, error analysis of responses is important. Some students are mainly dependent on sight strategies for reading. Thus, errors such as "gray" for "glory" result. Problems with letter orientation result in the misreading of "month" for "mouth" where the /n/ is inverted into a /u/. Problems with letter transpositions are also common, i.e. misreading "beard" as "bread". Failing to analyze words from beginning to end also often leads to errors such as "personalize" for "personality" and "fortune" for "fortunate".

Similar errors are also apparent in spelling. Adults with learning disabilities often forget basic sight words such as "his". They confuse vowel sounds within words, spelling "tin" for "ten" and "haert" for "hunt." Despite the phonetic regularity of these words, a student often

cannot encode the correct sound-letter associations. Sounds are often omitted in words, i.e., "n" for "an". Many adults with learning disabilities demonstrate poor phonological awareness or a lack of understanding that spoken language is composed of sound units. They also need to learn some very basic rules such as that every syllable within a word must contain a vowel.

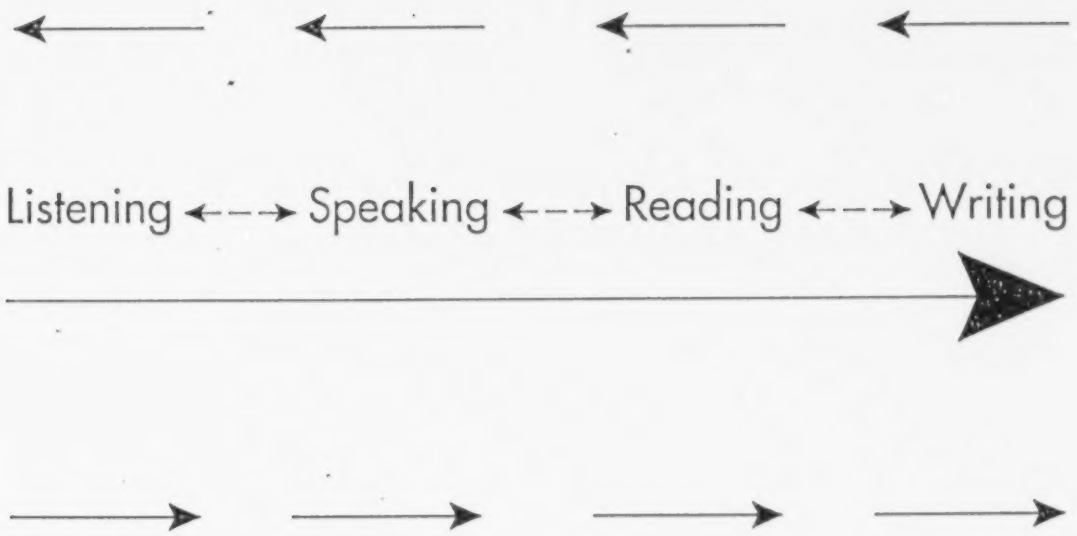
Once the decoding and encoding errors of adults with learning disabilities are analyzed, appropriate instruction can be planned. It is important for tutors in ABE programs to become familiar with those clinically proven instructional strategies for learning disabled adults who display decoding and encoding problems.

APPROACHES TO INSTRUCTION

Because adults with learning disabilities have good intelligence and poor visual memory, teaching strategies must capitalize upon their good thinking rather than rote memorization. "Teaching Adults With Learning Disabilities" emphasizes synthetic phonics instruction which is highly structured, sequenced and rule-based. Tutors are taught how to present adult learners with information about the six syllable types, rules of syllabication and principles of structural analysis. Tutors are shown how to make and use a resource notebook with their clients within which can be inserted new concepts learned for purposes of later reference. Because adults with learning disabilities need to learn how to apply and automatize phonics concepts, tutors are shown strategies for practicing and generalizing these concepts to text. Finally, teaching techniques for developing a sight vocabulary to supplement synthetic phonics learning are shared.

Just as teaching adults is different from teaching children, teaching adults with learning disabilities is different from teaching adults with other kinds of learning problems. It is essential that we provide those people who most frequently encounter adults with literacy problems with the skills to identify and instruct adults with learning disabilities. Effective and efficient staff development for ABE tutors is a worthwhile investment.

THE LANGUAGE CONTINUUM



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

DR. BLANCHE PODHAJSKI founded the Stern Center for Language and Learning in 1983 and has been director since its beginning. The Stern Center is a non-profit organization which provides literacy services for children and adults as well as training opportunities for educators and medical professionals. Dr. Podhajski is an Associate Clinical Professor of Neurology in the University of Vermont College of Medicine.

Dr. Podhajski received her doctoral degree in communication disorders, specializing in learning disabilities, from Northwestern University. She holds the Certificate of Clinical Competence in speech pathology from the American Speech and Hearing Association and has published and presented numerous papers in the areas of language and learning disabilities.

In addition to providing direct services to individuals with learning disabilities for over 25 years, Dr. Podhajski serves as a resource to numerous professional and parent organizations and offers inservice courses throughout the country. She is a member of NAASLN and the State Coordinator for NAASLN in Vermont.